

رمضان و ليلة القدر



Ramadan & Laylatu-l-Qadr

notes for a talk given at the ʾIslāmic Study Center

by

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وَلَذِكْرُ اللَّهِ أَكْبَرُ ۗ

WA LA-DhIKRU-LLĀHI AKBAR

and the remembrance of Allāh is the greatest!
(Sūrah al-Aʿnākabūt 29:45)



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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ
يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا كُتِبَ عَلَيْكُمُ الصِّيَامُ
كَمَا كُتِبَ عَلَى الَّذِينَ مِن قَبْلِكُمْ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَتَّقُونَ

yāā °ayyuha-l-ladhīna °āmanū kutiba °alaykumu-ş-şiyāmu
kamā kutiba °ala-l-ladhīna min qabālikum la°allakum tattaqūn

Oh you who securely believe, fasting is written for you
just as it was written for those who came before you.

(Sūrah al-Baqarah 2:183)

With this single °āyah, Allāh ﷻ prescribes for us one of the five major responsibilities incumbent on all humans contained in the latest Revelation of the *dīn* (religion), which is the principle of fasting.

At the same time Allāh ﷻ makes clear that this is not something new, by telling us that this aspect of the *dīn* was also prescribed for those who came before us in °Islām.

Accordingly the Children of Bani °Isra°il have their days of fasting just as the followers of °Isā ﷺ have theirs.

Thus we find in Deuteronomy 9:7-21 that Mūsā ﷺ fasted for forty days and forty nights, twice back-to-back, without food or water; the first time, immediately before he received the Revelation from Allāh ﷻ on the mountain in Sinai and the second after coming down from that mountain when he found the Children of Bani °Isra°il practicing idolatry worshipping a golden calf. We find the same story in Sūrah al-Baqarah (2:51), thus bearing out what Allāh ﷻ has said regarding His ﷺ earlier prescription of fasting.

Similarly we find in the °Injīl (Matthew 4:2, Luke 4:2) that °Isā ﷺ fasted for forty days and forty nights while in the desert during which time he was tempted by Şhayṭān to break his fast by turning stones into bread and eating them.

In the present day both Jews and Cristians fast on certain days and for certain lengths of time though neither of them in the present time observe fasting to the extent that Muslims do.

Additionally Allāh ﷻ explains the purpose for fasting in the following words in the same °āyah:

لَعَلَّكُمْ تَتَّقُونَ

la^ʿallakum tattaqūn
that you might bcome G-d conscious

or

that you might have taqwa
(Sūrah al-Baqarah 2:183)



This is a major point to which I shall return in the course of this talk, as it represents the first of four themes that characterize Ramaḍān, all of which are laid out at the end of four consecutive ʾāyāt in Surah al-Baqarah. Namely 183, 184, 185, and 186, which encapsulate or summarize the whole process of Ramaḍān on the believer.

If you will look at these ʾāyāt you will find that the last word in each of them is as follows:

1. *tattaqūn*, referring to taqwa or G-d consciousness.
2. *ta^ʿlamūn*, referring to ʾilm or knowledge.
3. *tashkurūn*, referring to shukr or thankfulness
4. *yarshudūn*, referring to rashad or guidance.

Interestingly enough all of these words end in the letter ‘*nūn*’ which has great significance in the light of Ramaḍān being the month in which the Qurʾān was first revealed and in light of this ʾāyah:

ن

وَالْقَلَمِ وَمَا يَسْطُرُونَ

nūūūn

wa-l-qalam wa mā yasturūn

Nūūūn. By the Pen and what they write.
(Sūrah al-Qalam 68:1)



On this subject Dr. Seyed Ḥosseīn Naṣr, in one of his essays, writes, “The primordial creative act was at once the Primordial Word which is the origin of all sound, and of the noble Qurʾān as a sonoral universe, and the primordial Point...

“The Primordial Word was not only the single ‘*Kūn*’ [also you will note ending in *nūn*] whose echo created the whole universe and which is contained in the noble Qur’ān as sound. It was also crystal-lized in the ink with which the Divine Pen (*al-Qalam*) wrote the realities of all things upon the Qur’ān as the ‘Mother of Books.’”

We should also note that Allāh ﷻ mentions the Pen or ‘*Qalam*’ in the first verses revealed to the Prophet ﷺ from the Sustainer, through angel Jibrīl عليه السلام in the Sūrah al-‘Alaq (The Clot 96), where the Prophet is ordered to “Recite” (‘*اقْرَأْ/اِقْرَأْ*’) and continues on further in the Sūrah to say.

اِقْرَأْ وَرَبُّكَ الْأَكْرَمُ • الَّذِي عَلَّمَ بِالْقَلَمِ • عَلَّمَ الْإِنْسَانَ مَا لَمْ يَعْلَمْ •

‘iqāra’ wa rabbuka-l-‘akramu-l-ladhi ‘allam bi-l-qalam

‘allama -l-‘iṅsāna mā lam ya‘lam

Recite! And your Lord is Most Generous!

Who taught by the Pen – taught the humans what they knew not.

(Sūrah al-‘Alāq 96:3-5)

The letter *nūn* (ن) resembles an ink-pot, an ink-pot which contains the divine ink with which the archetypes of all beings are written upon by the divine Scribe Who is the Creator ﷻ as the Divine Intellect and Designer. In Šūfic thought the Sustainer after first creating the Light (al-Nūr/النور) created the Pen or Qalam, then the Ink-pot or the *nūn*. The Sustainer begins the chapter of the Pen with the letter *nūn* and then the Pen. The scholar Kamal ad-Dīn Ḥusayn Kashifī in his Qur’ānic commentary relates the letter *nūn* to this Light (*nūr*) which was the first thing Allāh ﷻ created, and then says the last thing He ﷻ created was *ar-Raḥman*, the Universal Mercy, which He ﷻ ‘wrote’ in *ink* which is light upon Himself and for all the Creation.

كَتَبَ رَبُّكُمْ عَلَى نَفْسِهِ الرَّحْمَةَ ط

kataba rubbukum ‘ala nafsihī-r-raḥmah

Your Creator wrote Mercy upon Himself.

(Sūrah al-‘An‘ām)



Ramaḍān and Laylatu-l-Qadr

See how deep and far we have gone just from the beginning of what Allāh ﷻ has written for us in this realm of fasting (*sawm*).

As an aside while we are on the subject of meaning we should note that the root of Ramaḍān (*rāmāḍa*) means being scorched and parched and being consumed by grief and sorrow of which more later.

But to continue with the *°āyātun*.

After Allāh ﷻ makes clear to us His Purpose in prescribing or writing for us this month of fasting, He ﷻ goes on to say:

أَيَّامًا مَّعْدُودَاتٍ ۚ فَمَنْ كَانَ مِنْكُمْ مَّرِيضًا أَوْ عَلَى سَفَرٍ
فَعِدَّةٌ مِنْ أَيَّامٍ أُخَرَ ۚ
وَعَلَى الَّذِينَ يُطِيقُونَهُ فِدْيَةٌ طَعَامِ مِسْكِينٍ ۖ
فَمَنْ تَطَوَّعَ خَيْرًا فَهُوَ خَيْرٌ لَهُ ۚ
وَأَنْ تَصُومُوا خَيْرٌ لَكُمْ ۖ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ تَعْلَمُونَ

ayyām-ma°dūdāt; fa mañ kāna miñkum-marīdan °aw °alā safarīn

fa-°iddatum-min °ayyāmin ukḥar;

wa °ala-l-ladḥīna yuṭīqūnahu fidāyatūñ ta°amu miskīn;

fa-mañ taṭawwa°a ḵḥayran fa-huwa ḵḥayrul-lah;

wa °an taṣūmū ḵḥayrul-lakum °iñ kuñtum ta°alamūn

...[by fasting] for [the] numbered days.

And if any of you are sick or travelling

[then make it up on a similar] number of other days.

And for those who are able to,

there is an expiation [for the missed days of] feeding a person.

Yet whoever voluntarily does good, it is better for him.

And fasting is better for you if only you knew.

(Sūrah al-Baqarah 2:184)

The term ‘expiation’ in Arabic is *kaffārah* (كفارة) from *kāfara* which means to cover over something. In the *fiqh* of Ramaḍān it means that if you break your fast intentionally you must either fast sixty successive days or, if you are unable due to illness, feed sixty people.

In the case that you break or do not observe your fast because you are travelling or are chronically ill (ex: diabetes), you are obliged to feed one other person for each day you miss. In the latter case you are still obliged to make up the missed day and you should do this no later than the month of Shaʿbān in the following year, unless of course your illness makes this impossible, in which case the *kaf-fārah* of feeding sixty people applies.

Again in all of this it must be remembered, as Allāh ﷻ clarifies in the following ʾāyat, that it is not the intention of Allāh ﷻ to cause hardship but, rather, as we said in the beginning, to bring us to the state of G-d consciousness or *taqwah*. For this reason Allāh ﷻ in His Infinite Mercy has given all a way out as well as a way in.

Thus His saying:

وَأَنْ تَصُومُوا خَيْرٌ لَّكُمْ إِن كُنْتُمْ تَعْلَمُونَ

And fasting is better for you if only you knew.

In the next ʾāyat of al-Baqarah, Allāh ﷻ tells us that the crucial thing about this month is that it is the month in which this latest Revelation first began, and the main points about Revelation, namely that it is for Guidance and Discernment. He also makes clear that we will know when to begin fasting by sighting the moon.

شَهْرُ رَمَضَانَ الَّذِي أُنْزِلَ فِيهِ الْقُرْآنُ هُدًى لِّلنَّاسِ
وَبَيِّنَاتٍ مِّنَ الْهُدَى وَالْفُرْقَانِ ؕ
فَمَن شَهِدَ مِنْكُمُ الشَّهْرَ فَلْيَصُمْهُ ؕ
وَمَن كَانَ مَرِيضًا أَوْ عَلَى سَفَرٍ
فَعِدَّةٌ مِّنْ أَيَّامٍ أُخَرَ ؕ
يُرِيدُ اللَّهُ بِكُمُ الْيُسْرَ وَلَا يُرِيدُ بِكُمُ الْعُسْرَ
وَلِتَكْمِلُوا الْعِدَّةَ وَلِتُكَبِّرُوا اللَّهَ عَلَى مَا هَدَاكُم
وَلَعَلَّكُمْ تَشْكُرُونَ

Ramaḍān and Laylatu-l-Qadr

shahru ramaḍāna-l-ladhī ʿunzila fihi-l-qurʿānu hudal-l-li-n-nāsi
wa bayyīnātim-mīna-l-hudā wa-l-furqān;
fa mañ shahida miñkum-sh-shahra fa-l-yaṣumh;
wa mañ kāna marīḍan ʿaw ʿalā safarīn
fa-ʿiddatum-min ʿayyāmin ʿukḥar;
yurīdu-llāhu bikumu-l-yusra wa lā yurīdu bikumu-l-ʿusra;
wa li-tukmilū-l-ʿiddta wa li-tukabbirū-llāha ʿalā mā hadākum
wa laʿallakum tashkurūn.

The month of Ramaḍān is [the month]
in which the Qurʿān came down as Guidance for people
and the Clear Proof of that Guidance and Discrimination
[between good and evil]
[between right and wrong — between lies and the truth]
So who from among you [lives] to *see* the month, let him fast it,
and if any of you are sick or are travelling then [make it up]
[on a like] number of other days.
Allāh wants ease for you and does not want hardship for you,
and [He wants] you to fulfill the number [of fasting days],
and for you to magnify Allāh for having guided you
and to give thanks.
(Sūrah al-Baqarah 2:185)



The whole question of moonsighting has become very controversial in the modern Muslim world, with some Muslims arguing for some kind of one world position and others arguing that since we have the technology we should use it and proceed according to calculations, but among traditional Muslims of *ʿahl-i-sunnah wa jamʿat* there is a predisposition to follow what the Prophet ﷺ did and look for the moon and depend on local sighting or wait out the thirty days.

Here, for instance, is the recent opinion of Imām Zayd Shākir:

“Muslim scholars have long recognized that the only acceptable way for determining the beginning of the lunar month is by sighting the new crescent moon with the naked eye on the 29th evening of the month, or by completing a thirtieth day of that month if clouds or other atmospheric conditions obscure the view of the horizon.

“This issue of moonsighting is particularly relevant for the timings of Muslim devotional seasons and festivals. The scholars have also held that there are two basic geographical limits governed by the sighting of the crescent moon: a regional sighting that is relevant for a particular region; and a global sighting, that is relevant for the entire world.

“As for the naked eye sighting, this ruling is established on the basis of the unambiguous language of the prophetic utterance, “Do not fast [Ramaḍān] until you see the crescent moon, and do not break your fast until you see it.”[Bukhārī, no. 1906] Similarly, “Begin fasting with its sighting [the crescent moon] and cease fasting with its sighting.”[Bukhārī, no. 1909] The latter hadith concludes with the phrase, “...and if it is cloudy complete Sha‘bān in thirty days.”

“As for geographical limits that govern the sighting of the crescent moon, the difference of opinion surrounding this issue is well-known and goes back to the time of the Companions of the Prophet, peace and blessings upon him. Those arguing for a regional sighting, primarily scholars of the Shāfi‘ī (شافعي) School, refer to the narration wherein Kurayb and Ibn ‘Abbās differed on the sightings of Damascus and Madinah. Ibn ‘Abbās rejected the sighting of the people of Syria, which had been witnessed by Kurayb, implying that the Prophet, ﷺ, ordered the rejection of a distant sighting. [See Muslim, no. 1087] At the end of a lengthy narration, Kurayb asked Ibn ‘Abbās, “Are you not satisfied with the sighting of Mu‘awiya and his fasting?” Ibn ‘Abbās responded, “No! Thus did the Prophet ﷺ command us (*hakadha amaranā rasulu-llah*).”

“Opinions as to the definition of ‘regional’ vary greatly among the jurists.

“Those accepting that the entire world is governed by a single sighting point to the fact that there is a single lunar month for the world. The moon passes through its cycle from one month to the next as it revolves around the earth. This revolution is fixed and known although the actual sighting of the crescent moon demarcating the beginning of a particular month is problematic.

“According to the global position, once the crescent moon has been sighted anywhere on earth, that particular month has begun. Once the sighting of the crescent moon for the next month occurs, the previous month has ended.

“However, in some parts of the world the sighting of the crescent moon, owing to geographical or meteorological conditions, may be delayed by a day or two. That does not mean that somewhere on earth that particular month has not begun. What people in those regions (where sighting is delayed) are in fact witnessing is the moon of the second or third day of that month, according to this latter view.

“Adherents of this latter view thus argue that when the Prophet, peace and blessings upon him, mentioned, “Fast based on its sighting...” his order was to the entire Muslim Ummah based on the sighting of the crescent moon anywhere on earth. This position is based on the general nature of the wording of the hadith. This latter opinion is the majority opinion of the Hanbalis,[iv] Hanafis [v] and Malikis.[vi].

[iv] See Muwaffaq ad-Dīn and Shams al-Dīn ibn Qudama, *al-Mughni* (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, n.d.), 3:10-13

[v] See Muhammad Amin ‘Ibn ‘Abidīn, *Hashḥya Radd al-Muhtar* (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1415/1995), 2:432-433

[vi] See Mubarak bin ‘Ali al-Ahsa’i, *Tashīl al-Masālik ila Hidaya al-Salik ila Madhhab al-Imam Malik*, ‘Abdul Hamid bin Mubarak, ed. (Riyadh: Maktaba al-Imam al-Shafi’i, 1416/1995), 3:783

“Concerning the timings of our sacred observances, our situation in North America is unique owing to the composition of our community. On the one hand there are Muslims representing almost one hundred national and ethnic groups in our community. On the other hand there is no universally recognized central religious authority. Despite these realities, many Muslim organizations, though, have tried to adhere to a North American moon-sighting.

“However, that effort has been largely unsuccessful, at a national level, for a number of reasons. First of all, the large number of Mus-

lim ethnicities, with many groups of Muslims attempting to coordinate their sacred observances with Muslims in their home countries, creates confusion. Secondly, there are significant numbers of Muslims who advocate a global moon-sighting, though usually limiting the timings of the sacred occasions to the timing determined by the religious authorities of Saudi Arabia. Recently, a significant number of Muslims, who do rely on moon-sighting, expanded their zone of acceptable sightings to include South America and the Caribbean. Finally, international political realities factor into the decision-making process of some Muslim organizations.

“This situation has resulted in confusion, division and frustration for the average Muslim and most Islamic organizations. It has led to many Muslim communities and even individual families being divided and torn during times when they should be coming together in worship and or celebration. It has contributed to a lot of heartache and pain at a time when Muslims should be joyful. It has also led to an abandonment of the Sunnah of moon-sighting by growing numbers of Muslims and Islamic organizations.”

It should be noted that most of these concerns are unique to the North and South American as well as Australian/New Zealand Muslim communities where this is no central religious authority.

Where there is a central religious authority, as for instance in Egypt or Pakistan, the decision is made by the mufti and announced to the community usually by the firing of a canon or more lately on TV and that is the end of the whole “heartache and pain”. Tomorrow we fast and that is that and any discussion is entirely irrelevant.

I include °Imām Zayd’s remarks in this essay to give the reader an idea of how seriously Muslims do take what Allāh ﷻ and His Prophet ﷺ have said on this subject and in any case, and in the final analysis when fasting begins is, in accord with the Qur’ān and Sunnah, firmly based on the first sighting of the waxing crescent moon.



Of greater universal Muslim concern is that Allāh ﷻ has made clear to us through this ʾāyah (2:185) that what is truly important about this month is the Revelation of the Qurʾān and specifically what the utility of that Revelation is; namely Guidance and Discernment (*furqān*) of Right and Wrong, without which it is really not possible to live a principled life based on absolute, rather than relative, knowledge of what is right and what is wrong, what is good and what is evil, what is a lie and what is the Truth.

In reality if these things are not known to an individual the only life that is possible is the one I alluded to in in the essay on *The Inner and The Outer* where I discussed the issue of the “constant restlessness and non-ending dissatisfaction” that in truth lies at the root of so much human suffering and infects so many people in our present-day world .

In that essay I wrote that tranquility *may* be reached through complete and true knowledge — tranquility (*sakinah/maṭmaʾin*) which can also be understood as peace of mind, as opposed to the state of ‘confusion’ (*ḥayrah*) that pre-supposes a constant restlessness and non-ending dissatisfaction.

When we speak of “true knowledge”, that must perforce include and be firmly based on the knowledge of right and wrong, good and evil, truth and lies, for if not, how can there be a real tranquility, as everything in a world of moral and ethical relativity is always up for grabs, and what is right today may be wrong tomorrow, and what is a lie could be the truth looked at from another dimension, and thus one never comes to rest, and what you have is exactly the state of ‘confusion’ (*ḥayrah*) that pre-supposes that state of constant restlessness and non-ending dissatisfaction which never yields any form of peace or tranquillity.

In fact and in truth this state of confusion and dissatisfaction that grips many of the people who live in the world and, indeed, it is the state that grips the world itself, resulting in endless warfare and ceaseless agitation which most people have come to think *is* what life is, and so grace is lost and with grace, harmony, peace and inner well being which alone makes life worth living and truly satisfying.

وَإِذَا سَأَلَكَ عِبَادِي عَنِّي فَإِنِّي قَرِيبٌ ۖ
أُجِيبُ دَعْوَةَ الدَّاعِ إِذَا دَعَانِ ۖ
فَلْيَسْتَجِيبُوا إِلَيَّ وَلْيُؤْمِنُوا بِي لَعَلَّهُمْ يَرْشُدُونَ

wa idhā saʿālaka ʿibādī ʿannī fa-ʿinnī qaribā
ʾujību daʿwata-d-daʿi ʾidhā daʿanī
fa-l-yastajībū lī wa-l-yuʾminū bī laʿallahum yarshudūn.

And when My worshippers ask you about Me,
So [know that] I am near.

I answer the call of the caller when he calls me,
so let them respond to Me so that they may be rightly guided.

(Sūrah al-Baqarah 2:186)

Here we have reached the last ʾāyāt of the four stages of Ramaḍān I referred to at the beginning of this talk/essay:

1. *tattaqūn*, referring to taqwa or G-d consciousness.
2. *taʿlamūn*, referring to ʿilm or knowledge.
3. *tashkurūn*, referring to shukr or thankfulness
4. *yarshudūn*, referring to rashad or guidance.

Reviewing the four selected ʾāyātun, we can see the progression in Allāh’s Plan بِخَطِّهِ, that through fasting we attain to the state of G-d consciousness or *taqwa* which results in the acquisition of true knowledge (ʿilm/علم). Having acquired knowledge we come to finally see the world more or less as it really is through the knowledge of good and evil, which gives rise to our being thankful as a result of guidance, we no longer live in the state of constant restlessness and non-ending dissatisfaction, so we can finally ‘know’ what to do instead of constantly double guessing our own selves, those immediately around us and, in the furthest extension, the world itself.

In short we are no longer fooled or, at least, not fooled to the same degree that we were when we didn’t really know right from wrong or the truth from the lie or good from evil. It is as Allāh بِخَطِّهِ says, “that the truth has come and falsehood has vanished.”

وَقُلْ جَاءَ الْحَقُّ وَزَهَقَ الْبَاطِلُ ۚ إِنَّ الْبَاطِلَ كَانَ زَهُوقًا

wa qul jā°a-l-ḥaqqu wa zahaqa-l-bāṭil • °inna-l-bāṭila kāna zahuqā

and say, “Truth has come and falsehood has vanished.

Surely falsehood is ever bound to vanish.

(Sūra al-°Isrā° 17:81)

From this internal realization of the Truth (*ḥaqqiqah*) and the thankfulness that arises from it, Allāh ﷻ admonishes us:

فَلْيَسْتَجِيبُوا إِلَيَّ وَلْيُؤْمِنُوا بِي لَعَلَّهُمْ يَرْشُدُونَ

fa-l-yastajībū lī wa-l-yu°minū bī la°allahum yarshudūn.

so let them respond to Me so that they may be rightly guided.

(Sūratu-l-Baqarah 2:186)

It was this summons that Muḥammad ﷺ heard within and responded to without that led him to his meeting with Destiny (*al-qadr*) in the cave on the Mountain of Light outside of Makkah.

He had been fasting during the Arabic month of Ramaḍān (which was then intercalated and so it was the late middle part of summer and everything was (*ramaḍa*); scorched and parched) and he had left the city and gone to the cave as was his practice (*sunnah*) even before he received the Revelation (*waḥī* وحى) on a Night that was better than one thousand months, which is more than the life time of most humans as a thousand months equals almost 84 years.

إِنَّا أَنْزَلْنَاهُ فِي لَيْلَةِ الْقَدْرِ • وَمَا أَدْرَاكَ مَا لَيْلَةُ الْقَدْرِ
لَيْلَةُ الْقَدْرِ خَيْرٌ مِنْ أَلْفِ شَهْرٍ

°innā° a°nzalnāhu fī laylati-l-qadr • wa mā° adraka mā laylatu-l-qadr
laylatu-l-qadri khayrum-min °alfi shahr

Truly We send it down on Night of Destiny

And what will make you understand the Night of Destiny.

The Night of Destiny is better than a thousand months.

(Sūrah al-Qadr 97:1-3)

That the Prophet ﷺ was given this experience is well known and the circumstances surrounding it are equally well known.

For many years it had been his habit during the month of Ramaḍān, (which in those days always fell in mid to late summer as the Arabs at that time, as the Jews today, intercalated the lunar calendar to fit a solar one) to leave his home and family to go into seclusion for the purpose of both fasting and praying in the Cave of Hira on the Jabal an-Nur (جبل النور) or the ‘The Mountain of Light’, which is a mountain a few miles outside the city of Makkah.

That he did so prior to the coming of the Revelation and the Dīn of ʾIslām can be understood by the long held custom of fasting, which we mentioned earlier in this talk/essay, by both Jews and Christians and, presumably, the Ḥunafāʾ (sing, ḥanīf حنيف, pl. حنفاء) who were the pre-Islamic non-Jewish and non-Christian Arabian monotheists who had retained some or all of the true tenets of the monotheist religion of the Prophet ʾIbrāhīm عليه السلام. All three of these groups were present not only in the Arabian Peninsula at the time of the Prophet ﷺ but also were in and out of Makkah and especially Yathrib, the city of his mother, which had a long established Jewish community.

The Ḥunafāʾ are mentioned many times in the Qurʾān and, very much to our point, in Sūrah al-ʾAnʿām 6:161:

قُلْ إِنِّي هَدَانِي رَبِّي إِلَى صِرَاطٍ مُسْتَقِيمٍ دِينًا قِيَمًا مِلَّةَ إِبْرَاهِيمَ حَنِيفًا
وَمَا كَانَ مِنَ الْمُشْرِكِينَ

qul ʾinnanī hadānī rabbī ʾilā ṣirāṭim-mustaqīm dīnañ qiyamam
milata ʾibārāhīma ḥanīfā; wa mā kāna mina-l-mushrikīn

Say, “My Lord has guided me to a straight path, an upright religion, the faith of ʾIbrāhīm, a ḥanīf. He was not a polytheist.”

It has been theorized by the orientalist Montgomery Watt that the verbal term ‘ʾIslām’ arose from the participle form of *Muslim* (surrendered to Allāh), and may have only arisen as an identifying descriptor for followers of the religion in the late Madinan period.

Muslim scholars have taken the term *ḥanīf* and its abstract noun *ḥaniffiyah* in two senses: one as a synonym for historical Islam in the sense it was revealed to the Prophet ﷺ and practiced by Muslims, and the other as the natural state of monotheism of which the Prophet ʾIbrāhīm ؑ was a significant but not the sole practitioner.

The term is from the Arabic root *ḥanaf* meaning “to incline, to decline” (Lane 1893) from the Syriac root of the same meaning. The term *ḥanīfiyyah* is the law of ʾIbrāhīm ؑ; the verb *taḥannafa* means “to turn away from (idolatry)”, with a secondary and subsequent meaning of “to become circumcised”.

While we cannot know if the Prophet ﷺ was formally a *ḥanīf*, he certainly must have been aware of their existence. We also know that the Prophet ﷺ, when he was nine or twelve years old and accompanying the Makkan caravan to Syria, met a Christian monk or hermit named Bahira who foresaw his destiny ﷺ as a prophet. Presumably he also met with Jewish traders and merchants during the many years that he was a leader of caravans for his wife Khadijah ؓ and, no doubt, listened to their stories and discussions. Thus it is very safe to say that when Muḥammad ﷺ took himself to the Cave of Hira on the Mountain of Light for the purpose of fasting, solitude and prayer he was not acting without awareness that in doing so he was in consonance with well-known historical and, more importantly, spiritual precedence and long-held *ḥanīfiyyah* spiritual and cultural convictions and conventions.



The Mountain of Light and the Cave of Hira

In the year 610 his usual practice was completely disrupted and his life was changed forever when the angel Jibrīl ﷺ, first filling the entire horizon which he could see through the opening of the cave, announced his sublime presence to him in the first words of the Final Revelation and ordered him to ‘read’ or ‘recite’ or ‘chant’ (depending on how you wish to translate the arabic word, “*Iqārā*”).

Awed and shicked by this mighty apparition that had filled the entire horizon, he asked, “What shall I recite?” Again the divine voice very clearly and openly called out, “Recite! Oh Muḥammad!”

Remembering himself and the fact that he was unlettered he protested that he could not recite and yet again he heard the command and again he protested and again he heard the command and yet still protested whereupon this mighty form coalesced into the confines of the cave in the form of an angel and pressed him to his heart, whereupon he began to read, and when asked later by his wife how he could have read since he was unlettered he said, “It was as though the words were written in light upon my heart.”

اقْرَأْ بِاسْمِ رَبِّكَ الَّذِي خَلَقَ • خَلَقَ الْإِنْسَانَ مِنْ عَلَقٍ

°iqāra° bismi rabbika-l-ladhi khalaā • khalaqa-l-°īnsana min °alaqā

“Read in the Name of your Lord Who created.

Created the human being from a clot.”

(Sūrah al-°Alaqā 96:1-2)

He was, according to some accounts, terrified by what had happened and quickly left the Cave of Hira, making his way by starlight down the slopes of the Mountain of Light.

According to Sunni traditions, upon receiving his first revelations Muhammad was deeply distressed and returned home where he was consoled and reassured by his wife, Khadijah ﷺ and by her Christian cousin, Waraqah ibn Nawfal who upheld Muḥammad ﷺ and vouched entirely for the authenticity of his ﷺ experience.

Shī‘ah traditions, on the other hand, maintain that Muḥammad ﷺ was neither surprised nor frightened at the appearance of Jibrīl ﷺ but rather welcomed him as if he had been expecting him.

A full description from the Sunni perspective of what took place can be found in a ṣaḥīḥ ḥadīth narrated by ʿĀʿisha رضي الله عنها:

“The commencement of the Divine Inspiration came to the Messenger ﷺ in the form of good dreams which came true like bright day light, and then the love of seclusion was bestowed upon him. He used to go in seclusion in the cave of Hira where he used to worship [Allāh ﷻ alone] continuously for many days before his desire to see his family. He used to take with him on the journey food for the stay and then come back to [his wife] Khadijah رضي الله عنها to take his food again till suddenly the Truth descended upon him while he was in the cave of Hira. The angel came to him and asked him to read. The Prophet ﷺ replied, “I do not know how to read.”

“The Prophet ﷺ added, “The angel caught me [forcefully] and pressed me so hard that I could not bear it any more. He then released me and again asked me to read and I replied, ‘I do not know how to read.’ Thereupon he caught me again and pressed me a second time till I could not bear it any more. He then released me and again asked me to read, but again I replied, ‘I do not know how to read [or what shall I read?].’ Thereupon he caught me for the third time and pressed me, and then released me and said, ‘Read in the name of your Lord, who has created [all that exists], has created man from a clot. Read! And your Lord is the Most Generous.’ [96.1-3] Then the Messenger ﷺ returned with the Inspiration and with his heart beating severely. He went to Khadijah رضي الله عنها and said, “Cover me! Cover me!” She covered him till his fear was over and after that he told her everything that had happened and said, “I fear that something may happen to me.” Khadijah رضي الله عنها replied, “Never! By Allāh, Allāh will never disgrace you. You keep good relations with your kith and kin, help the poor and the destitute, serve your guests generously and assist the deserving calamity-afflicted ones.”

“Khadijah رضي الله عنها then accompanied him to the home of her cousin Waraqah bin Nawfal bin Aṣad, who, during the pre-Islamic Period, became a Christian, and used to write scripture with Hebrew letters. He would write from the Gospel in Hebrew as much as Allāh ﷻ wished him to write. He was an old man and had lost his eyesight.

“Kḥadijah ﷺ said to Waraqah, “Listen to the story of your nephew, O my cousin!” Waraqah asked, “O my nephew! What have you seen?” The Messenger ﷺ described what he had seen and heard. Waraqah said, “This is the same one [Jibrīl ﷺ] who keeps the secrets that Allāh had sent to Mūsā ﷺ. I wish I were young and could live up to the time when your people would turn you out.” The Messenger ﷺ asked, “Will they drive me out?” Waraqah replied in the affirmative and said, “Anyone who came with something similar to what you have brought was treated with hostility; and if I should remain alive till the day when you will be turned out then I would support you strongly.” But a short time later Waraqah died and the Divine Inspiration also paused for a while.” This ḥadīth is found in Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukḥarī volume 1, book 1, number 3

According to another hadith, al-Hākim reported with a ṣaḥīḥ ṓisnād from ṓĀʿisha ؓ, that the Prophet ﷺ said, “Do not slander Waraqah ibn Nawfal, for I have seen that he will have one or two gardens in Paradise.” (Ṣaḥīḥ al-Jāmi as-Sagḥīr, 6/1534, no. 7197)



Having now understood the events that took place on the Night of Destiny (Laylatu-l-Qadr), we need to understand more about the spiritual signifigance of that blessed night.

لَيْلَةُ الْقَدْرِ خَيْرٌ مِنْ أَلْفِ شَهْرٍ
تَنَزَّلُ الْمَلَائِكَةُ وَالرُّوحُ فِيهَا بِإِذْنِ رَبِّهِمْ مِنْ كُلِّ أَمْرٍ
سَلَامٌ هِيَ حَتَّى مَطْلَعِ الْفَجْرِ

laylatu-l-qadri khayrum-min ṓalfi shahr
tanazzalu-l-malāʓikatu wa-r-rūḥu fihā
bi-ʓidhni rabbiḥim min kulli ṓamr
salāmun hiya ḥatta maṭlaʕi-l-fajr

The Night of Destiny is better than a thousand months.

In it the angels and the Spirit descend
by the permission of their Lord, bearing with them all the Orders.
Peace it is — until the coming of the dawn.

(Sūrah al-Qadr 97:3-5)

My own Shaykh, Dr. Ibrahīm Muḥammad al-Baṭāwī ﷺ, wrote a very useful essay entitled, “*A Summary of the Method of Obtaining the Experience of Laylatu-l-Qadr*”, and I am indebted to him for much of what I will say on the subject of the spirital dimensions of the *Laylatu-l-Qadr* as well as understandings I have gleaned from the *Tafsīr* of *Sūrah al-Qadr* by ʿibn Kathīr,

لِنُرِيَهُ مِنْ آيَاتِنَا

li-nuriyahu min ʿāyātina

...that We might show him some of Our Signs...

(al-ʿIsrāʾ 17:1)



لَقَدْ رَأَى مِنْ آيَاتِ رَبِّهِ الْكُبْرَى

laqadā raʿaya min ʿayāti rabbihi-l-kubārā

surely he saw one of the greatest Signs of his Lord

(an-Najm 55:76)

• وَلَقَدْ رَأَاهُ نَزْلَةً أُخْرَى • عِنْدَ سِدْرَةِ الْمُنْتَهَى •
• عِنْدَهَا جَنَّةُ الْمَأْوَى • إِذْ يَغْشَى السَّدْرَةَ مَا يَغْشَى •
• مَا زَاغَ الْبَصَرُ وَمَا طَغَى • لَقَدْ رَأَى مِنْ آيَاتِ رَبِّهِ الْكُبْرَى •

wa laqadā raʿahu nazlatan ʿukhrā • ʿinda sidrati-l-muntahā •
ʿindahā jannatu-l-maʿwā • ʿidh yaghṣha-s-sidrata mā yaghṣhā •
mā zāgha-l-baṣaru wa mā ṭaghā •
laqadā raʿaya min ʿayāti rabbihi-l-kubārā •

And indeed he saw him another time.

at the Cedar Tree of the Furthest Boundary.

Near to the Garden of Refuge.

Where there covered the Cedar Tree what covered it.

His gaze neither wavered nor did it stray

Indeed he saw the greatest Signs of his Lord.

(al-Najm 53:13-18)



First of all I should say that our Shaykh was very much of the opinion that the experience of Laylatu-l-Qadr was something that was entirely necessary for anyone who had taken the path to Allāh ﷺ.

He did not say it would not be nor could not be the same experience that the Prophet ﷺ had been granted, but that the murīd must reach the point in his/her life where he/she has a spiritual experience that is worth more to him/her than their entire life.

لَيْلَةُ الْقَدْرِ خَيْرٌ مِنْ أَلْفِ شَهْرٍ

laylatu-l-qadri khayrum-min °alfi shahr

The Night of Destiny is better than a thousand months.

(Sūrah al-Qadr 97:3-5)

The very first thing the Shaykh mentions in this regard is the qirā° or recital of the Qur°ān. It is important here to understand that this is not a ‘passive’ reading, a ‘private’ reading but it is a reading which is a recital, it is chanting, it is cantillation and, above all, it is out loud and no way is it sitting reading silently to your self.

This is the first step and this practice should be continuous every morning after the fajr prayer and every evening after the °ishā prayer and without breaking it be it winter, summer, spring or fall.

This practice is supplemented by the weekly hadrah or dhikr session preferably in the company of the fuqarā and with the shaykh.

This is what I call “Sonic Theology” which has to do with the repetition of the vowel sounds of “ah”, “ee” and “oo” and a few consonants, particularly “mmm”. These sounds have an effect on certain subtle centers in the body called the laṭā°if, and most particularly the various centers of the heart, throat, pineal gland and crown.

You may think of it somewhat as a cognate of going to the gym to work out. Unless you exercise your centers they fall asleep and all spiritual progress except for that which is gratuitous is absent.

You may also think of the centers as flames. If the flame burns steady and clear it heats the water for tea. If it is agitated and blown about it is incapable of producing concentrated heat and the water never boils nor is the meal ever cooked.

Ramaḍān and Laylatu-l-Qadr

This recitation of Qurʾān specifically and also various Names of Allāh is a very important part of the spiritual path leading to the experience of the Laylatu-l-Qadr.

Once you have done this practice for a number of years you need to begin what the Shāykh calls, “Active Awareness Recitation”.

This is a practice for the development of spiritual discipline and mental concentration. Here the tongue remains motionless and the awakened heart is busy with what is actually being read and with the Divine Speaker who is reading it and surrounds you on all sides.

For this practice you will need a notebook or a series of notebooks and you will write in these notebooks both the essence of what you derive from the reading as well as insights and various stray thoughts which may arise which on first review will seem extraneous, but which, over time, will yield a particular form of congruity and which should, in time, provide important spiritual insights.

Next it is important to act in conformity with what you read and from what you you have culled from your readings. The result is:

اللَّهُ نَزَلَ أَحْسَنَ الْحَدِيثِ كِتَابًا مُتَشَابِهًا مَثَانِيَ تَقْشَعِرُّ مِنْهُ جُلُودُ الَّذِينَ
يَخْشَوْنَ رَبَّهُمْ ثُمَّ تَلِينُ جُلُودُهُمْ وَقُلُوبُهُمْ إِلَىٰ ذِكْرِ اللَّهِ ۚ ذَٰلِكَ هُدَىٰ
اللَّهُ يَهْدِي بِهِ مَن يَشَاءُ ۚ وَمَن يُضْلِلِ اللَّهُ فَمَا لَهُ مِن هَادٍ

allāhu nazzala ʾaḥsana-l-ḥadāthi kitābam-mutashābiham-mathānī:
taqāsha°irru minhu julūdu-l-ladhīna yakkhsowna rabbahum’
thumma talīnu juluduhum wa qulūbuhum ʾilā dhikri-llāh;
dhālika huda-llāhi yahdī bihi mañy-yashāā°;
wa mañy-yuḍlilī-llāhu fa-mā lahu min hādā.

Allāh has sent down the most beautiful message in the form of a Book
which is fully consistent with itself,
(yet) repeating its teaching (in various ways)
which causes the skins of those who fear their Lord to shiver:
then their skins and hearts to soften in the remembrance of Allāh
by which He guides whom He wills.

And one whom Allāh leaves astray – for him there is no guide.

(Sūrah az-Zummar 39:23)

By this practice you are ‘softened’ in the Remembrance of Allāh ﷻ.

These practices should be coupled with another practice. One more outer (though still inner) and one more inner.

In the first you must endeavor to gather on a weekly basis, as we have mentioned before, with other students of your ṣaykh or, if you are living in a distant place from him, with other people from the fuqara for communal recital of Qurʾān and active dhikr of Allāh.

Abu Hurayra ؓ said that the Prophet ﷺ said: “The earth and everything in it is cursed, except for dhikr and what attends dhikr, and a teacher (of dhikr) and a student (of dhikr).” [Narrated by Tirmidhi who said it is *ḥasan*, Ibn Majah who said the same, Bayhaqi, and others. Suyūṭi cites it in *al-Jamiʿ as-Sagħir* from al-Bazzar’s similar narration from Ibn Masʿud and he declared it ṣaḥīḥ. Tabarani also narrated it in *al-ʿAwsat* from Abu al-Dardā.]

Acts of worship performed in a group – which include *dhikru-llāh* – are more excellent than acts of worship done alone. The hearts meet in the group, and in the group people find mutual help and harmony. The weak can take from the strong, those in darkness from those with light, the dense from the diaphanous, the ignorant from those with knowledge, and so forth.

ʿAnas bin Malik reported that the Messenger ﷺ said, “When you come upon the meadows of the Garden, graze in them.” He was asked, “What are the meadows of the Garden?” “Circles of dhikr,” he replied. [at-Tirmidhī]

Abu Hurayra reported that the Messenger ﷺ said, “Allāh ﷻ has angels who travel the highways and by-ways seeking out gatherings of dhikr in the earth. When they find a gathering of dhikr, they enfold them with their wings stretching up to the heaven. Allāh asks them, ‘From where have you come?’ They reply, ‘We have come from Your slaves who are glorifying You, praising You, proclaiming Your oneness, asking of You and seeking refuge with You.’ He says – and He knows better than them, ‘What are they asking Me for?’ They reply, ‘They are asking You for the Garden.’ He says, ‘Have they seen it?’ They reply, ‘No, our Lord.’

He says, 'How would it be if they were to see it?' Then He asks – and He knows better than them, 'What are they seeking refuge from?' 'From the Fire,' they reply. He asks, 'Have they seen it?' 'No,' they reply. Then He says, 'How would it be if they were to see it?' Then He says, 'I testify to you that I have forgiven them, I have given them what they ask Me for, and I have given them the refuge which they ask of Me.' They say, 'Our Lord, among them is a wrongdoer who is sitting with them, but is not one of them.' He says, 'I have forgiven him as well. The one sitting with these people will not be wretched.'" [Muslim, at-Tirmidhī, al-Ḥākim]

Abu Hurayra reported from Abu Sa'id al-Khudri that the Messenger ﷺ said, "There are no people who remember Allāh ﷻ without the angels surrounding them, mercy covering them, tranquility descending on them, and Allāh ﷻ mentioning them to those who are with Him." [Muslim, at-Tirmidhī]

Anas reported that the Messenger ﷺ said, "Allāh ﷻ has angels who travel about seeking out gatherings of dhikr. When they come to them, they encircle them." (Al-Bazzar)

Anas also reported that the Messenger ﷺ said, "When you come upon the meadows of the Garden, graze in them." He was asked, "What are the meadows of the Garden?" "Circles of dhikr." he replied. [at-Tirmidhī]

This gives, we hope, the listener/reader some idea of the real benefit of attending the circles of dhikr, especially with the teacher, in the company of the fuqara.

As such this is the more outer of the two practices, though of course it is also deeply inner but outer in the sense that it takes place with a gathering and any gathering also has side or secondary interactions which take one away from pure concentration.

In the second practice you need to set aside for your self a period of time of about an hour each week to enter into retreat (*khalwah*/خلوة).

In his book, *Journey to the Lord of Power*, Muhiyid-Dīn ibn 'Arabī (1165-1240 A.D.) discusses the stages through which the Sufi passes in his *khalwah*. He suggests:

“The Sufi should shut his door against the world for forty days and occupy himself with remembrance of Allāh ﷻ, that is to keep repeating, "Allāh ﷻ, Allāh ﷻ..." Then, The Almighty will spread before him the degrees of the kingdom as a test.”

This idea of forty days is based on an āyāt concerning Mūsā ﷺ:

وَإِذْ وَاعَدْنَا مُوسَىٰ أَرْبَعِينَ لَيْلَةً

wa ʿidh wāʿadnā mūsāa ʿarbaʿīna laylah

and [remember] when We appointed for Mūsā forty nights [of solitude]
(Sūrah al-Baqarah 2:51)

However we know that the Prophet ﷺ never practiced *khalwah* after his times in the Cave of Hira and receiving the Divine appointment of the Prophethood, nor did his companions رضي الله عنهم, nor did their followers. On the contrary, the Messenger ﷺ encouraged socializing among Muslims and regarded it as praiseworthy, as reported in the following hadīth narrated by Ibn ʿUmar رضي الله عنهما:

“The believer who intermingles with people and endures patiently their mischief will have greater reward than the one who does not intermingle with people and does not endure patiently their mischief.” [Muslim]

For this reason and others our Shaykh confined the period of *khalwah* to an hour a week and specified the following practice:

“Sit down and recite the Verse of the Throne (ʿayāt al-kursī) and the last part of Baqarah which was given to the Prophet ﷺ in the Miʿraj (2:285-286) beginning with “ʿāmana-r-rasūlu...” followed by anything you know by heart from the Qurʾān. Then recite The Most Beautiful Names of Allāh which occur in the beginning and end of the first part of ʿĀyāt al-Kursi (al-Ḥayy, al-Qayyūm, al-ʿAlīyyu, al-Aḍḥīm) and then as many as you can remember of the 99 Beautiful Names. Pronounce each Name slowly without there being a fixed number so that your concentration is *not* diverted into mere completion of a certain number, but, instead, is fixed on the gift (*jannah*) which Allāh ﷻ has in store for you. This should be done in the same way as your *ṣalat*, not to finish it but to do it well.

“Make your ṣalāt with full consciousness so that Allāh ﷻ may accept it together with the *duʿā* you have included within it.

“It is essential that every Name is accompanied by your awareness of being encompassed by Allāh ﷻ; in other words, you internally couple the Name, *al-Muḥīt* (The All-Encompassing) with each Name you recite. You can also do this in your ṣalāt, knowing that your soul is standing before Allāh ﷻ and that Allāh ﷻ is encompassing you together with the entire universe.

“Do not become preoccupied with the shape or the form of the letters of the Name but rather put all your concentration on its deepest meaning and allow that to encompass you.

“This retreat (*kḥalwah*) should last no less than an hour and be done in a room with lowered lights. Be certain that Allāh ﷻ has accepted your repentance (*tawbah*) and that Allāh ﷻ will heal your sickness and pains and answer your supplication (*duʿā*) during this retreat and during your prayers.”

In addition to these two constant and consistent practices the Shaykh also speaks of the necessity of kindness to orphans and the prompt payment of zakāt which he recommends should be paid daily, saying that the zakāt, “is on your salary and on everything He ﷻ gives you by way of livelihood (*rizq*).” and I attest that in my life with him I observed he always did both of these things.

He also advised us “to be strong and positive in all your affairs. Enjoin the good and forbid the evil. Even if you attain to the limits of righteousness, yet fail to enjoin the good and forbid the evil (*ʿamr al-maʿrūf wa nahy ani-l-munkar*/ الأمر بالمعروف ونهى عن المنكر) your Night of Power will remain veiled from you, for the Prophet ﷺ taught that any one who relinquishes the jihad and the struggle with hand, tongue and heart has no more than a tiny seed of faith.”

He also said, “Each person has his own Night of Destiny which may occur more than once in the month (of Ramaḍān) or the year.”

This last saying of his is extremely important to understand and gets you beyond the mere formalism of trying to assess every year if you have truly experienced the Night of Destiny (*Laylatu-l-Qadr*).

In this regard it is very important to understand that there is a metaphorical Night of Destiny and a very real Night of Destiny and the two are not at all the same.

If you have to ask yourself somewhere around the last odd numbered nights of Ramaḍān, “Was that Laylatu-l-Qadr?” and go outside in the night to make sure there are no shooting stars or run out after Fajr in the morning to check if the sun has rays or not, you have definitely *not* experienced the real Night of Destiny though you may have experience the metaphorical Night in that you feel good and clear and more certain etc. inside of your self but — remember— the Night of Destiny is better than one thousand months and if what happened to you was not better than a thousand months then you have not experienced the Night of Destiny but a facsimile thereof.

Our Shaykh goes on to say: “Every human being has within him or herself the capacity to receive the Night of Destiny as long as he or she qualifies for it by acting properly. *“Never was it the purpose of Allāh that your faith should be in vain.”* (Sūrah al-Baqarah 2:143). Allāh ﷻ says, *“Truly the hour is coming. But I will keep it hidden that every soul will be awarded what it strives for.”* (Sūrah Tā Hā 20:15). The Night of Destiny is not restricted to one person, one people, one nation, one race to the exclusion of others. *“For those who do good is the best reward and even more. Neither dust nor humiliation comes near their faces.”* (Sūrah Yūnus 10:26) And He ﷻ says, *Truly the noblest of you in the sight of Allāh is the one who is most conscious (’atqākum).*” (Sūrah al-Ḥujarāt 49:13)

As a *caveat* our Shaykh says, “Whenever you ask a favour of Allāh ﷻ or perform the Prayer of Need (*ṣalātu-l-l-ḥajjah*), follow it up with some charity given to an orphan or poor person. Allāh ﷻ says, *“If you consult with the Messenger, then give something of what belongs to you in charity (ṣadaqah) before your consultation.”* (Sūrah al-Mujādallāh 59:12)

Likewise, should your determinations or what you have set out to accomplish falter, or should you sense that you have acted incorrectly, make haste to purify yourself through fasting and the free will gift of *ṣadaqah*.

Allāh ﷻ says, “Take from your wealth a gift freely given by which you [may] purify them and cause them to grow in purity, and pray for the Blessings of Allāh ﷻ upon them.” (Sūrah at-Tawbah 9:103)

In another very strong warning the Shāykh says, “The Night of Destiny will be denied to you should you request something material. You may well be granted it, but you will be barred from coming to Allāh ﷻ, that voyage which corresponds to your regaining the Garden from which your parents, Adam ﷺ and Hawwah ﷺ were expelled by their act of rebellion. You may enter the Garden once more through pure obedience to Allāh ﷻ, shorn of all polytheism (*shirk*/شرك) including that of love of power over people or of receiving a material reward for your worship such as the stipend of an ʿimām, for any such act of *shirk* will become a veil between you and truly deep spiritual attainment.

“It is in this fashion that one night, in which you make your commitment to unceasing obedience and to fasting from acts of rebellion for the rest of your life, becomes better than the life span of your parents, Adam ﷺ and Hawwah ﷺ, after their departure from the Garden, and better than any life when the lost Paradise is finally recovered.” As Allāh ﷻ says,

لَيْلَةُ الْقَدْرِ خَيْرٌ مِنْ أَلْفِ شَهْرٍ

laylatu-l-qadri khayrum-min ʿalfi shahr

The Night of Destiny is better than a thousand months.

(Sūrah al-Qadr 97:3-5)

Also note carefully in the preceding paragraph the following phrase, “fasting from acts of rebellion for all of your life”.

If you really want to understand the deep meaning of the fast of Ramaḍān which is more than what the Prophet ﷺ said, “Some people fast and all that they get is hungry,” then understand as deeply as you can the meaning and significance of that simple phrase, as it contains the substance and pith of the reality (*ḥaqqiqah*) of fasting.

In this same context I also recommend a deep reading of *The Mysteries of Fasting* or *the Inward Condition of Fasting* by al-Ghazālī رحمه الله.

Many Muslims think that fasting simply means abstaining from water, food, sex etc during the daylight hours of Ramaḍān and then gorging themselves at night and wasting time in trivial pursuits.

In *The Mysteries of Fasting*, al-Ghazalī makes clear that there are very discrete three levels of fasting.

1. The fast of the ordinary person.
2. The fast of the select few.
3. The fast of the elite.

The fast of the ordinary person has already been described, i.e. the abstinence of appetite, sexual intercourse, noise, arguing etc ...

The fast of the select few is that of keeping the ears, eyes, tongue, hands, feet together with all the other senses free from sin.

These virtuous people free themselves from sin in six ways:

1. Refraining from looking at anything that is blameworthy or disapproved. Jabir, on the authority of ʿAnnās رضي الله عنه related that the Messenger of Allāh ﷺ said:

“There are five things that break the fast: telling lies, backbiting, telling tales, perjury, covetousness and lustful eyes.”

2. Keeping the tongue free from ranting and raving, lying, backbiting, tale-telling, obscenity, abusive speech, wrangling, and hypocrisy. Rather, one should busy oneself with the remembrance and exaltation of Allāh ﷻ, as well as the recitation of the Qurʾān – this is the fasting of the tongue.

3. Closing the ears to all that is reprehensible. The Messenger of Allāh ﷺ said: “The backbiter and the listeners are partners in sin.”

4. Constraint of the rest of the senses from sin. Restraining the hand from evil, curbing the foot from the pursuit of wickedness, avoidance of questionable foods at the break of the fast.

As we mentioned earlier, the Messenger of Allāh ﷺ said: “Many receive nothing from the fast except hunger and thirst.”

This hadith has been explained as referring to the person who breaks the fast on unlawful food and drink. It has also been ex-

plained as referring to people who abstain from ḥalāl food and break the fast on the flesh of others through illicit backbiting, also, that it refers to the person who does not keep his senses free from sin.

5. Over indulgence when breaking the fast, even when the food is ḥalāl. The spirit as well as the secret of fasting is to weaken the flesh, which is shayṭān's tool for turning mankind back to evil.

6. After breaking the fast, the heart should remain in a state of suspense between fear and hope as one does not know whether the fast has been accepted.

al-Aḥnaf, son of Qays was once told: "You are an old man, and fasting will make you weak." He replied: "This fast is my preparation for a long journey. Indeed, to endure the yoke in the service of Allāh ﷻ is easier than to endure the yoke of His wrath."

The above is by way of a sample because you should read the book.

Another source book for understanding fasting is *Nourishment for The Hearts (Qutu-l-Qulūb)* by Abu Ṭalib Makkī and especially the chapter on The Specialized Fasting of the Muqinīn or The People of Certainty meaning those who have no doubt and who have reached the high rank of doubtlessness with regards to the Divine Beingness. This person is above and beyond the confinements of human logic and reasoning that allow for doubting and probabilities.

"May Allāh ﷻ The Sublime grant you success—Know that regular fasting amongst the fasters is that of their corporeal form (i.e. abstaining from eating and drinking) while the specialized fasting of the The People of Certainty (*muqinīn*) is the fasting of:

1. The Heart (*Qalb*) in abstaining from the preoccupations and the musings of the world
2. The ears, the eyes and the tongue in abstaining from transgression of the Divine Limits (*ḥadd* or حدود/*ḥudūd*)
3. The hands and feet in abstaining from exerting force upon, and striving towards the causes and instruments of the Divine Prohibitions (*al-nahy*/النهي)

“He who fasts in such a manner has fully grasped and comprehended the passage of his time each day and the occurrence of each hour—living his entire day in full Remembrance (*dhikr*). It is of such that it has been said: “The sleep of the one who fasts is worship (*‘ibādah*) and his every breath is praise (*tasbiḥ*).”

[This is a specialized form of fasting in which the heart empowers the seeker (*murīd*) to taste each moment of his life regardless of the external conditions. Today we hear millions saying: “Life is passing me by” or “The week just went by so fast” or “My life is all wasted”. This peculiar form of fasting is a definite cure for the wasting away of human life. It can be practiced by anyone anywhere anytime and at any age!]

“The Exalted, the Mighty—Allāh ﷻ, has coupled the notion of hearing falsehood (*bāṭil*) or speaking offensively with that of eating unlawful provision (*ḥarām*)! Were it not for the unlawful within what is heard and spoken for the listener as well as for the speaker, Allāh ﷻ would not have conjoined them with the notion of eating unlawful foods which are not ḥalāl which is one of the Great Sins.

“Allāh ﷻ The Sublime has said, “[They are fond of] listening to falsehood, of devouring anything forbidden” (Sūrah al-Ma’idah 5:42) and again: “Why do not the rabbis and the religious learned men forbid them from their [habit of] uttering sinful words and eating things forbidden?” (Sūrah al-Ma’idah 5:63).

“Indeed a slave preserving and observing the Divine Limits (*ḥudūd*/ حدود) set by Allāh ﷻ remains as though fasting in the presence of Allāh ﷻ even after he breaks the fast, by eating or by sexual intercourse, due to the virtue of continuous compliance (with the limits). Whoever fasts by abstaining from food and sex but continually transgresses the *ḥudūd* is not considered a faster in the presence of Allāh ﷻ — for his self (*nafs*) is not fasting, for what he has missed of the fast is dearer to Allāh ﷻ than what he has complied with.

[There is nothing dearer to Allāh ﷻ than preserving and observing the *ḥudūd*. in this case abstaining from both food, water, smoke and sex from sunrise to sunset.]

“The example of someone who fasts by merely abstaining from food, yet leaving the rest of his limbs ungoverned, is the example of a person making ablution by merely ‘wiping’ over the limbs ‘thrice’ without water, then praying. His prayer is void because all he succeeded in doing was to maintain the number (three) of wipes while he abandoned the obligation of ‘washing with water’— a failure of functionality.

“But the example of someone who fasted by abstaining from food and sex and preserved his limbs from all sins is the example of a person making ablution by washing his limbs with water thrice meeting the requirements and performing the prayers in the most perfect status as stated by Allāh ﷻ: “...making complete our favor upon one who would do good...” (Sūrah al-ʿAnʿam 6:154).

[Here Makki is setting an example of invalid behavior as opposed to the perfection of an action or a ritual.]

“And as was said by the Prophet ﷺ, “This is my ablution and that of the prophets before me, the ablution of my forefather ʾIbrāhīm and Allāh ﷻ said: “The nation of your forefather ʾIbrāhīm” (Sūrah al-Hajj 22:78), in other words, it is up to you to follow him ﷺ.

“The Prophet ﷺ said, “The grateful person eating has the same status as a patient fasting person.”

“During the time of the Prophet ﷺ two women fasted struggling with thirst and hunger till they were at the point of death at the end of the day. They sent a dispatch to the Prophet ﷺ seeking permission to break their fast.

“In response the Prophet ﷺ sent them back a bowl saying: “Tell the women to vomit what they have eaten into this bowl.” One of them vomited blood and much meat and the other woman did the same, until the bowl was entirely full of blood and meat.

“The people were bewildered and the Prophet ﷺ explained:

“These two women were outwardly fasting by abstaining from what is allowed by Allāh ﷻ for them by way of food and drink but in reality they broke their fast by not abstaining from what was forbidden by Allāh ﷻ for them.

“They sat next to one another backbiting people and this (blood and meat in the bowl) is the flesh of the people (they were backbiting).

“Allāh ﷻ says: ‘Oh you who believe! Avoid suspicion as much (as possible): for suspicion in some cases is a sin: And spy not on each other behind their backs. Would any of you like to eat the flesh of his dead brother?’ (Sūrah al-Ḥujurāt 49:12)

“Abu Dardā° said: ‘How wonderful! The sleep and the breaking of the fast of the clever people dishonors the moron’s fasting and a single particle endowed with certainty (*yaqīn*) and righteousness is preferred over the mountains of worship performed by the ignorant who is deceived by this evanescent world.’

[Those worshipers who understand the spiritual meaning beyond the physical actions are successful (*falah*) whilst the ignorant worshiper is lost within the surface-manifest of the physical actions, even though his actions of worship may be numerous.]

“All that is forbidden for you to say is forbidden for you to listen to, and all that is forbidden for you to do is forbidden for you to look at or even to think about, otherwise “you would be like them” (Sūrah an-Nisā° 4:140).

“Fasting is similar to repenting (*tawbah*) since they both require patience. Repentance covers up the loathsome actions committed in the past; it requires patience for that which has passed of foul habits and the parting with bad habits requires safeguarding the limbs that were the conduits for loathsome deeds.

In the same way, fasting is protection against the Fire and a virtue on the part of those who rank amongst the righteous! When the one who fasts applies patience, he safeguards his limbs against the sins, but when he commands his limbs towards sinful actions his situation is similar to the one who repents but is on the verge of breaking his promise not to do wrong again; his *tawbah* is insincere and his fast less than virtuous as you can see in the words of the Prophet ﷺ:

“Fasting is the protection against the Fire so do not impair the protection with lying or backbiting.”

“And again in his words: ‘During the day when one of you is fasting do not be obscene or foolish, and if someone abuses you, the one who is fasting should say, ‘I am fasting.’, ‘I am fasting.’”

“And in other Prophetic words: “Fasting is a ‘trust’, so each one of you must preserve what is entrusted upon him”, the preserving of this trust is that of safeguarding the limbs (against committing evil).

“Similarly, as the Prophet ﷺ was teaching the verse: ‘Allāh ﷻ commands you to render trusts to those to whom they are due.’ (Sūrah an-Nisā’ 4:58), he placed his hands over his ear and over his eye and said: ‘The ear is a trust and the eye is a trust’, and this is the figure of speech when the faster says: ‘I am fasting’. Namely he who fasts remembers the trust that is being carried and the fact that he has to return it to its rightful owners. He who preserves a trust hides it (e.g. covering the eyes not to see evil); if he shows it, in the absence of a valid reason, he indeed has betrayed the trust, since the one to whom the trust is due did not allow for it to be revealed. The reality of preserving a secret is forgetting all about it; for a secret to be lost, its vault should be fortified. Therefore the reality of fasting is to forget all about the fast itself and not to wait for the time to break the fast, i.e. busying the fasting with transience.”

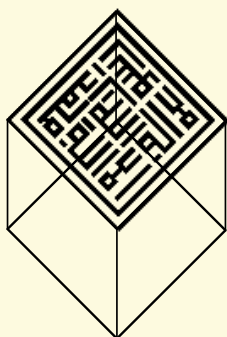


“In shā’a-llāh (إن شاء الله) through the reading of these words from Abu Hamid al-Ghazālī رحمه الله and Abu Ṭalib Makkī رحمه الله as well as Shaykh Ibrahīm al-Batawī رحمه الله and this poor person the listener/reader will have a much better understanding of Ramaḍān, the fasting within it and the Night of Destiny. Before I became a Muslim the thing that most frightened me about Islam was the idea of fasting for a whole month. Now, some forty years later, I have learned so many things from fasting that I have come to love it but that love has only come through learning how to experience the deeper and more profound dimensions of the fast so that I get something other than hungry and thirsty....*wa-llāhu ‘alim*



Completed on Ramaḍān 1, 1431 in Charlottesville, Virginia.

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